Nancy van den Berg-Cook, Ph.D.

# The Magic Mirror in Snow White

*Please note: this lecture was based on a number of illustrations that cannot all be included in this print version. If an illustration is important and cannot be shown, I will give a description of it.*

Today I will talk about the fairy tale Snow White, and specifically, the images of the evil stepmother and her magic mirror. This will not be a definitive interpretation of the entire fairy tale, but instead I want to use the story to weave together several themes that are relevant to our 'jaarthema': Het aangezicht als Spiegel. Thus, I will talk about the symbol of the mirror and its psychological meaning in general, as well as in the story of Snow White.

My idea to study the fairy tale with a focus on the evil queen, rather than the girl Snow White, and to see the events from her point of view came from an excellent book by Jacqueline Schectman: *The Step Mother in Fairytales, Bereavement and the Feminine Shadow* (1993). Other recommended reading for this topic are: Mario Jacoby's *Individuation and Narcissism, the* ***Psychology*** *of the Self in Jung and Kohut* (1990), and Nathan Schwartz-Salant's *Narcissism and Character Transformation. The* ***Psychology*** *of Narcissistic Character Disorders* (1982).

Before we go on to the story, let us review the question of why we look for psychological meaning in fairy tales. Like dreams, fairy tales appear to be a product of the human unconscious, that offer a vision that is complementary to the prevailing conscious view. Thus where the conscious attitude is unrealistic, too narrow, contemplation of this vision from the unconscious can be potentially healing. But instead of a dream that functions in the individual psyche, the fairy tale seems to function for an entire culture. It is effectively a *collective fantasy*. As it is told and retold, elements of the story added by the individual teller fall away, like sifted sand, while the more universal themes remain, so it becomes valid for the group of people in general. Here is the story as told by the Grimm brothers (Zipes, 1987). I have rewritten it in abridged form.

## Snow White

In the deepest winter, a childless queen sat sewing at her window. She pricked her finger with the needle and blood dropped onto the snow. She thought to herself that the red of the blood looked beautiful on the snow and wished that she might have a child who was "white as snow, red as blood and black as the ebony wood of her window frame."

Nine months later she gave birth to a little daughter who was indeed white as snow, red as blood and with hair black as ebony. However, the queen herself died in childbirth. The king married another woman who was beautiful, but very proud and jealous of anyone who might rival her beauty. She had a magic mirror and often stood in front of it and asked,

*Mirror, mirror on the wall,*
*who in this realm is the fairest of them all?*

And the mirror would answer, “You my queen, are the most fair of all.” With this reply, she was happy because she knew the mirror NEVER LIED.

As Snow White grew she became every day more beautiful. and then, one day, when Snow White was seven years, old the queen asked the mirror who was the most beautiful of all. It replied,

*You, my queen, may have a beauty quite rare,*
*But Snow White is a thousand times more fair.*

Naturally the queen was furious to hear this and she came to hate Snow White so much that she never had a moment’s peace. She ordered a huntsman (Jager) to take the girl into the forest, murder her, and bring back her lungs and her liver as proof that Snow White was dead. But when the hunter had Snow White in the forest, he didn’t have the heart to murder her. He let her go and killed a wild boar instead, and brought the boar’s lungs and liver to the queen. The queen ordered the cook to boil them and she ate them up that very night.

Meanwhile Snow White had run deep into the woods where she discovered the home of the seven dwarves. They were ‘delirious with joy’ when they discovered her in their house. They told her she could stay with them and they would provide everything she needed if she would “keep house , cook, make the beds, wash, sew, and knit, and keep everything orderly.”

*Brief summary of rest of the story*: Soon the queen learned from her mirror that Snow White still lived. She was enraged and made a total of three attempts to kill Snow White. In the last attempt, with a poison apple, the queen believed she had succeeded. Later, when the dwarves found the lifeless body of Snow White, they felt she was too young and beautiful to bury so they placed her in a transparent glass coffin for all to see.

In time a prince came along and fell in love with her. When he ordered his servants to carry the coffin containing Snow White to his castle, they stumbled, and jolted Snow White. The piece of poison apple that was lodged in her throat flew out, and Snow White was revived. She loved the prince in return, and at their wedding ceremony, the evil queen was punished: she was forced to put iron slippers that had been heated in a fire and to dance until she died.

We can see here that the mirror certainly plays a central role. What, then, is the symbolic meaning of mirrors? I want to describe two important aspects of mirror symbols. First, mirrors represent a threshold between consciousness and the unconscious. A second point is that they represent an important psychological function.

# The mirror as threshold

In her book *Projection and Recollection,* ML von Franz (1990) has studied the symbolic meaning of the mirror. She demonstrates how throughout the history of humans, in many different cultures, shiny surfaces have been experienced as being numinous. In other words, reflective surfaces have always held a fascination for humans because they seem to have some extraordinary (buitengewoon) qualities.

In February we heard Dr. Jacoby discuss the myth of Narcissus in which the reflective surface of water in a pond was the central image of the myth. Dr. Jacoby stated that Narcissus

was entranced by his own reflection in the water, because the surface of the water reflected the Self, or at least the possibility of coming to know the self. But why and how does it reflect the Self? We know that Jung has demonstrated that water itself, with its reflective surface, is a symbol for the unconscious. Von Franz, again in *Projection and Recollection* (1990), describes the relation between the reflective surface and the unconscious:

*The symbolization of the unconscious by water with its mirror-like surface is of course based … on a projection. Nevertheless, the analogies are astonishingly meaningful. Just as we cannot 'see' into the depths of the waters, the deeper areas of the unconscious are also invisible to us… . But on the surface, on the threshold area between consciousness and unconsciousness, dream images appear spontaneously, not only seeming to give us information about the depths but also mirroring our conscious personality. … The mirroring is always by way of the symbolic image that has a place in both worlds.*

Thus, a mirror symbolizes the threshold between consciousness and the unconscious, and by looking into it, one may look towards the depths of the unconscious. And, the image that a mirror produces is symbolic and can be made sense of in both the unconscious and the conscious worlds.

A well known example of this symbolism in literature is the magic mirror in Goethe's *Faust*.

Mephistopheles brings Faust to the kitchen of a witch. Faust discovers there a magic mirror and becomes entirely entranced with what he sees in it. And what does Faust see when he looks into the unconscious, as it were? He must, by definition, see the opposite of his conscious personality. Faust is portrayed as a totally dried up and exhausted University scholar, who is so lost in the world of intellect that he has lost all lust for life. In the mirror, he sees a healthy and vibrant young woman, who can be seen to symbolize everything he is not. For Faust she is the world of feminine beauty, sexual desire and instinct. We will recognize her as what Jung calls the anima of a man. A point to remember for later is that for women, the face of the unconscious is the animus. Once Faust has seen this woman in the mirror, he is driven to pursue her and, thus, to eventually transform his life.

# Mirroring in psychological development

Reflection and the mirror are extremely important themes in modern psychology. They are central to our understanding of how infants and young children develop consciousness and a healthy sense of self. Many psychologists have recognized the importance of the mother-child relationship in this process, but perhaps Donald Winnicott, a British Child Psychoanalyst writing in the 1960's, has made the clearest and most convincing definitions of this process. One of his key papers on this subject, is entitled, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development" (Winnicott 1967). Note that he assigns the role of mirroring to both mother, also to be understood as primary caretaker of the infant, and the family in general.

What do we mean by *mirroring*? I recently saw a talk by the Jungian child psychotherapist Brian Feldman who used this beautiful painting by Leonardo da Vinci to illustrate mirroring.

Oil painting by Leonardo da Vinci,
St. Anne, Madonna and Child

Here we see the Christ child being lovingly looked upon by his mother. And as happens countless times in the early phases of childhood, he looks back into her face. Winnicott's basic idea is that as the newborn infant gazes into the face gazing back at him, he 'sees' himself – he cannot distinguish himself from mother yet. He/mother are effectively one. Eventually, the child begins to recognize that this face of mother is something 'other,' and perhaps wonders what is that something other doing? The child then begins to realize increasingly that this other "is looking at ME." "And this means that I EXIST." These are the first steps of consciousness. This process continues and the child begins to learn things about himself through interaction with this 'mirror.' For example, when the child laughs, mother laughs in return and eventually the child understands, "I am laughing."

Needless to say, the quality of this exchange is central to how a child experiences himself. In order for a child to develop a strong sense of self, the input from the primary caretaker, and later the family, needs to reflect the *child's* genuine 'own' experiences. For example, if only happy outbursts were answered with happy mirroring by the mother, but unhappy outbursts were met with no response, the child would have difficulty learning to recognize the unhappy aspect of his personality and integrating it into his sense of self.

If this mirroring process is severely disturbed, the adult can develop what has been called a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Narcissism as such, is a problem of not enough mirroring where not enough mirroring refers to both the total amount and the quality of the mirroring.

But how much mirroring do humans, even as adults, need? And who provides mirroring that is meaningful? The Jungian analyst Nathan Schwartz-Salant, is a recognized authority on Narcissism. He maintains that we humans require some degree of mirroring from others, throughout our entire lives, and certainly in times of difficulty. Providing this mirroring is naturally a part of psychotherapy. In this painting by Da Vinci, we can see that the Madonna is also receiving mirroring. Her mother, St. Anne gazes upon her with love and acceptance. Indeed, the Madonna is actually sitting on the lap of her mother while St. Anne seems to hold and support the entire exchange between Mary and Jesus within her loving gaze. We can imagine that both the mother and the child benefit from the mirroring that St. Anne is providing.

As we said, in early infancy, the "primary caretakers" provide the mirroring. But as the child grows, all of the primary figures in a child's life become important: thus school teachers, older siblings, and especially in the early teen years, friends and famous figures. If we combine all of these people, starting with the parents, we can say they reflect the *culture at large*. Thus, one can say that in addition to the parents, the entire culture functions as a mirror to the individual.

Painted stage backdrop for a children's school production

Returning to the wicked Step Mother in Snow White, we need to remember that we are looking at the story from her point of view, as if she is the ego and the other characters are aspects of herself. Who is this woman and why is she so cruel, and why so busy with the mirror? If we stretch the technique of making a psychological diagnosis of an individual and apply it to this imaginary figure, we could say she fits the symptoms of the classic Narcissistic Personality Disorder. These symptoms include:

*Rage*: Narcissists cannot tolerate changes in their environment that destabilize their sense of self. An example of this is the typical response of a narcissistic parent when their child fails at school. The problem is always related back to the parent and he/she says to the child, "What will MY friends think!"

*Weak sense of self*: The Queen looks continuously into the mirror, no doubt hoping to get a sense of who she is. She asks it repeatedly about herself, asking in a way for reassurance. She is obsessed with looking because she has no stable sense of self. She doesn't know who or what she is, and thus keeps looking and asking.

When the mirror tells her she is no longer the most beautiful woman in the land, she goes into such a rage that she "came to hate Snow White so much that she never had a moment's peace." She is in a narcissistic crisis, but why? Why is she so devastated at the diminishing of her youthful beauty? Aging is not always nice, but why murderous rage? It is only such a crisis to get old if one's primary sense of self, and accordingly one's well-being, is built upon one's youthful *appearance*. Many women in our patriarchal culture have come to rely on their physical beauty to feel self worth because it is often the quality that has been most emphasized and mirrored back to them! This was especially true historically when women had very limited opportunity to fully develop, for example, their intellectual or athletic abilities.

I want now to make a comment about Western culture at large. I realize this will be a gross generalization, but it is certainly in part very true. In spite of the women's movement, our culture today still bombards young girls with the pressure to conform to very narrow standards of beauty. All one has to do is look around, in movies, television, even the advertisements at the bus stops, to be reminded how women *should look*. If we believe that the culture at large should support and nurture the individuals in it, to help them develop into

emotionally healthy adults, then we must say that our culture is failing girls terribly. It is not providing adequate mirroring, but instead, primarily reflecting back to girls what the cultural ideal is.

This is precisely the same pattern that is seen in parents who narcissistically wound their children. An example is as follows: a child is naturally gifted musically, but the parents do not recognize it, and only give the child attention when he does well in math. The child's individuality is not recognized, he is not seen and made aware of his own talents. But in addition, the parents pressure the child to be something he is not. This influence can even be viewed as a double insult. The girl is often not only not seen for who she actually is, but she is at the same time pressured to be something she is not. We can call this society's cruel mirror. Such a mirror can be devastatingly destructive to a developing sense of self.

Pencil drawing by American Woman

I felt that this drawing from a young American woman illustrates the 'cruel mirror' that society presents to girls. Indeed, the face with lines looks like a sort of death mask, and the ring of flowers like a funeral garland.

We are all aware that there is a growing epidemic of anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders among girls in the Western world. I have provided a reference for an excellent book on eating disorders published by a group of women psychoanalysts (Bloom, C. et al. 1994). They argue that the diseases can be caused by a damaged and incomplete sense of self in the girls and women who suffer from them.

Coming back to the queen and her mirror, if she can't see herself in the mirror, what does she see? With whom does she hold the discussion when she repeatedly asks the mirror to reaffirm her? Remember, we have said that when one gazes into a mirror, one often looks into one's unconscious. Let me show you how various illustrators -- dating back as early as the illustration by Walter Crane from 1882 -- have interpreted the queen and her mirror. The first is possibly the most famous version of the mirror from the Walt Disney film made in 1932.

Disney animated film, 1932

Based only on the mirror's words in the story, the Disney's group has personified the mirror as a sort of fiery masculine spirit, that looks frightening, if not downright cruel. This theme of a masculine spirit is also present in the illustrations by Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham.

Illustration by Walter Crane, 1882

In Crane's mirror, we see the face of the lovely queen reflected, but the mirror frame itself is decorated with dragons that are fiery by nature, but here also hold torches.

Illustration by Arthur Rackham, 1909

The mirror by Rackham is surrounded by smoke from the burning candles and sitting on the frame, representing perhaps the spirit or daemon of the mirror is a strange, masculine gnome-like figure. [In addition to these illustrations, I also showed photographs from two different stage productions of Snow White, one based on the version by Roald Dahl. In both

productions, the mirror is depicted as a man. In the Roald Dahl play, he is very humorous, with a round tummy and wearing what looks like a bright red union suit (full-body long underwear).

In all of the illustrations I could find, the mirror either reflected the queen's face or was inhabited by this 'masculine spirit of the mirror.' From the point of view of Jungian psychology, this spirit can be understood as the queen's animus, and indeed, if she looks into her own unconscious when gazing in the mirror, we would expect her to see the animus because it can personify the unconscious itself in dreams and fantasies of women.

The queen relies on this masculine 'authority' to tell her if she is beautiful or not. To interpret this in an individual woman's psyche (the psyche we diagnosed earlier), we would say she has a very critical and judging animus function. It is negative and powerful and functions to make her feel good about herself only so long as she satisfies the strict requirements of 'beauty' that she holds for herself. This is precisely what we tend to see in women with a damaged sense of self, or said in another way, with a narcissistic problem. They are often driven by an inner masculine voice that gives structure to life but is a very cruel task-master, making the women prove themselves -- to themselves! -- repeatedly, while offering ample criticism and giving the women the feeling that they are never good enough. The inner negative animus is never satisfied.

Thus we see that the queen and her magic mirror appear to portray an important psychological problem for women. And accordingly, we expect that the fairy tale will proceed with information about how to repair the narcissistic problem with its negative animus function. But that is a topic for another lecture or two. However, with everything we now know, perhaps we can make some guesses about the meaning of the continuing story.

I want to end this presentation with a question for the audience. If we take the queen to be the center of the story, we can see the girl Snow White as *one aspect* of the queen and specifically, as a new development (because she is a child). If we accept Jung's observations that the psyche works to heal itself, what healing influence does Snow White, this new aspect, offer to the narcissistically wounded queen?

I'm eager to hear what ideas you all may have in the following discussion period, but first I will tell my idea.

Snow White with Hunter by C. Santore

This is Snow White in the woods with the hunter who was ordered to kill her. Notice how they look so intensely into each other's face. Does Snow White offer the queen a new way of relating to the masculine power inside of herself? And does this hunter represent a more healthy animus figure (compared to the magic mirror spirit)? When the hunter refuses the authority of the queen and lets Snow White go free, does this suggest that the queen is developing a new, less destructive inner masculine? I believe it does, but we need to look at the whole story, including of course, the dwarves, to see if this makes sense. Perhaps another time!

# References


- Bloom, C. et al. (1994) *Eating Problems, A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model* Basic Books, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers.
- Franz, Marie-Louise von (1990) *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian* ***Psychology*** Open Court, La Salle IL USA.
- Jacoby, Mario (1990) *Individuation and Narcissism, the* ***Psychology*** *of the Self in Jung and Kohut* Routledge, London, New York. This book has many references to Jung's original work.
- Schectman, Jaqueline (1993) *The Stepmother in Fairy Tales. Bereavement and the Feminine Shadow* Sigo Press, Boston.
- Schwartz-Salant (1982) *Narcissism and Character Transformation. The* ***Psychology*** *of Narcissistic Character Disorders* Inner City Books, Toronto, Canada.
- Winnicott, Donald (1967) "Mirror-role of mother and family in child development", first appeared in: P. Lomas, ed., *The Predicament of the Family: a Psycho-analytical Symposium,* 1967, Hogarth Press. To be found on the internet: www.sectionfive.org/winarticle.htm
- Grimm and Grimm (1987) *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Translator Jack Zipes, Bantam Books, New York.